

## The Eyes and Ears of the Avalanche Center

By Doug Chabot

All winter long at 4 a.m. Eric, Mark or I are in the office, coffee in hand, our minds slowly waking to put together the morning's avalanche advisory. The meat of the advisory is the snowpack discussion which we craft into a few paragraphs which concludes with the avalanche danger rating. We determine the stability by digging holes, isolating columns, doing stability tests and taking notes on everything we're seeing. One of us is out with a partner most days of the week, but even so, we can't always get everywhere we need. Our advisory area encompassing 6,000 sq. miles of terrain including the Bridger Range, the Gallatin and Madison Ranges from Bozeman to Big Sky and West Yellowstone and also the Beartooths near Cooke City. With an area this large it's impossible to see it all on a regular basis so we rely on the public observations to help us formulate the avalanche danger.

We are a small avalanche center and do not have formal requirements for skiers or snowmobilers to send us observations. We listen to everyone, filtering the information as it comes into our email. If you get outside to recreate, no matter your skill level, you can be our eyes and ears. A few simple observations is all we need. The easiest way is to go to [www.mtavalanche.com](http://www.mtavalanche.com) and click on "Submit and Observation" or email us directly at [mtavalanche@gmail.com](mailto:mtavalanche@gmail.com). Working together we can reduce uncertainty with snowpack stability; all it takes is answering a few basic questions.

Weather observations: How much new snow? Wind direction? Wind speed estimate? Cloud cover?

Avalanche Observations: Did you notice any recent avalanche activity? Collapsing/cracking or other signs of instability?

Snowpit Observations: If you dug a snowpit, what was the weakest layer? How far down was it? What were stability test scores?

General Thoughts: Anything else relevant regarding ski or snowmobile conditions?

Folks tend to think we need scientific data, but this is not so. While a snowpit is definitely helpful, pictures are another valuable way to convey a message. If you triggered an avalanche and wrote us, maybe even gave us a few pictures, we would be indebted. And fear not, unlike Wikileaks we respect people's privacy and will also keep the location of their secret powder stashes, secret. Even a simple sentence can give us great information. For example, "Two inches of new snow, no instability, great skiing, and no wind-loading" says a lot, especially if we haven't been to that area in a while. It takes the guesswork out and gives us something concrete to work with.

The next time you head out, drop us a line, send us a picture and let us know what you found. The avalanche advisories will be better because of it.

